



File Code: 1950

Date: September 11, 2018

Dear Reviewer,

The Madison Ranger District on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest (BDNF) is beginning the environmental analysis for the Strawberry to Cascade Allotment Management Plan and seeks your input.

We encourage you to review the scoping document and map that describes the proposed project here on the project website: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=54522>

Future project-related documents will also be posted at this same address. We encourage you to check back periodically to see if any new documents or information is posted there. If we do not receive written response to this scoping letter we will not send you further written notice of future document availability and/or other opportunities to provide input.

How to Comment

Please share your comments, concerns, or ideas with Dale Olson, District Ranger, Madison Ranger District, at 5 Forest Service Road, Ennis, MT 59729. He can also be reached by phone at 406-682-4253, or by fax at 406-682-4233. If you prefer, you can send your comments electronically to comments-northern-beaverhead-deerlodge@fs.fed.us and type **Strawberry to Cascade** in the subject line.

Comments are due 30 days from the publication date of the Notice of Intent to Prepare an EIS (NOI) which is the official start date of this scoping period. We expect publication of the NOI to occur on September 14, 2018 however commenters must rely solely upon the NOI publication date to determine when their comments will be due. Comments in response to this solicitation, including names, postal and email addresses and phone numbers, will be considered part of the public record, and available for public review.

Sincerely,

DALE OLSON
District Ranger

Enclosures



Strawberry to Cascade Allotment Management Plan Scoping Document

Background

Domestic livestock, including domestic sheep, were introduced in the Gravelly Landscape (including the lands currently managed by the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest) shortly after discovery of gold in Alder Gulch in 1863, more than 150 years ago. In 1920, an estimated 104,700 ewe/lamb pairs were permitted on the Madison National Forest in the Gravelly, Greenhorn and Snowcrest Mountains.

Currently, 7,800 ewe/lamb pairs are permitted to graze seven domestic sheep allotments (Barnett, Black Butte Bench, Coal Creek, Cottonwood, Fossil Hellroaring, Lyon Wolverine and Poison Basin) and in portions of the Upper Ruby Cattle and Horse Allotment on the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest (BDNF). Allotment locations are displayed on the attached map.

These allotments have been grazed by sheep since prior to the establishment of the National Forest. Current allotment boundary configurations are a result of various allotment combinations. Permitted domestic sheep annually trail to and from these allotments. The trailing route from the west is through The Notch (located in the Snowcrest Mountains). Trailing may also occur from private lands located to the east. It takes approximately 2-3 days for each band to trail to the allotments.

Grazing use of these allotments currently follows prescribed practices detailed in term grazing permits and Allotment Management Plans (AMPs) which are described below.

Rangeland Management Decision-making and Allotment Management Plans

There is a two-part decision to be made for authorizing livestock grazing.

1. Whether livestock grazing should be authorized on all, part, or none of the project area.
2. If the decision is to authorize some level of livestock grazing, then what management prescriptions will be applied (including standards, guidelines, grazing management, and monitoring) to ensure that desired condition objectives are met or that movement occurs toward those objectives in an acceptable timeframe.

Details of decision point #2 are documented for individual allotments in a project area in an AMP. AMPs are documents applying to management of rangeland ecosystems and livestock operations on public lands prescribing: (1) the manner and extent to which livestock operations will be conducted in order to meet ecosystem health, multiple use, economic and other objectives; (2) describing range improvements to be installed and maintained; and (3) such other provisions relating to livestock grazing and other objectives found by the Secretary of Agriculture to be consistent with the provisions of Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

The basic elements of an AMP include:

- a. Management objectives in terms of the condition and trend of the rangeland resources;
- b. Required livestock management practices including maximum amount of use in terms of allowable use levels to achieve management objectives;
- c. Structural or non-structural improvements that are necessary and ripe for implementation; and,
- d. Appropriate monitoring to determine if management objectives are being met or if adaptive management alterations are needed.

The Black Butte Bench AMP was developed in 1968, the Cottonwood AMP was developed in 2001 with the other five AMPs were developed between 1979 and 1992. We are proposing to update AMPs for the eight allotments after considering if the previously prescribed livestock management has achieved, or is trending towards desired resource objectives, or if changes in livestock management are needed.

Purpose and Need

Purpose & Need of the project is to assess and revise grazing management as necessary on the Barnett, Black Butte Bench, Coal Creek, Cottonwood, Fossil Hellroaring, Lyon Wolverine, Poison Basin and Upper Ruby allotments (sheep grazing portions) to ensure consistency with all law, regulation and policy, including direction in the Rescissions Act. The Rescissions Act of 1995 (P.L. 104-19) Section 504(a) and the 2004 Appropriations Act (P.L. 108-108) Section 325 require the Secretary of Agriculture to schedule when Forests will complete environmental analysis and documentation required under the National Environmental Policy Act for all grazing allotments.

Proposed Action

At this time the responsible official proposes continuing domestic sheep grazing within the project area following the management practices as described below. This proposal continues maintenance and use of cabins and associated facilities on the Poison Basin and Black Butte Bench allotments for the purpose of supplying sheep herder camps.

Standard Management Practices for Domestic Sheep Allotments in the Project Area

There are eight active sheep allotments in the Gravelly Mountains located along the mountain crest in the south central portion of the range. These allotments have been grazed by sheep since prior to the establishment of the National Forest. Current allotment boundary configurations are a result of various allotment combinations. As allotments were combined, the total number of permitted sheep was reduced. The eight sheep allotments are permitted under two grazing permits – Term Permit dated March 2, 2017 issued for grazing the Barnett, Coal Creek, Fossil Hellroaring, Lyon Wolverine and Poison Basin Sheep & Goat (S&G) allotments and Upper Ruby Riparian Pasture and Term Permit dated December 7, 2015 issued for the Black Butte Bench and Cottonwood S&G allotments.

All the sheep allotments are divided into camp units to facilitate a deferred rotation grazing system where each camp unit is grazed by domestic sheep at different times from year to year, allowing plant recovery and mostly uninterrupted plant development and reproduction. Each band is accompanied by a herder who manages the sheep throughout the grazing season. Specific grazing practices are followed when grazing and moving bands across an allotment.

Primary grazing practices include:

1. "Once over lightly" grazing will be practiced. Maximum forage utilization for "once over lightly" grazing is considered 35%.
2. Sheep will be open herded and dogs will be used to a minimum to prevent heavy trampling and over grazing.
3. Sheep will not be bedded within 300 yards of any stream or spring. There may be some exceptions due to topography. Sheep will not be shaded near water.
4. Sheep will be trailed to water using different routes. Trailing will be kept to a minimum.
5. Bed grounds will not be used more than one night.

Six permitted bands of sheep are annually trailed to and from their respective allotments along a designated route. (Please refer to the attached map showing the trailing routes.) This trailing route begins on the west side of the Snowcrest Mountains (beginning on private property) enters the BDNF near The Notch, a relatively low pass located in the middle of the Snowcrest Mountain range. Each of the six permitted bands are trailed usually ½ to 1 days apart to keep the bands properly separated from each other. It takes a total of 2 to 3 days for each band to trail through Forest Service lands to the grazing allotments. It takes a couple of hours for each band to pass through modeled bighorn sheep habitat in The Notch area of the Snowcrest Mountain range. From The Notch, the bands trail southeast on BDNF lands to Honeymoon park and then down onto the Beaver Bench Road and then north and/or east to their assigned allotments. The Poison Basin and Coal/Fossil sheep cross the Ruby River and then move south and east along the Ruby River Road grazing in the Riparian and Basin pastures of the Upper Ruby Cattle and Horse allotment prior to moving south and/or east to the assigned BDNF allotments. At the end of the grazing season the trailing route is generally reversed. If an early snow falls, sheep begin moving off the permitted allotments prior to their off date and gather just below 8,000ft in neighboring Upper Ruby cattle allotment pastures before they begin their trail off the Forest. This trailing route has been used since sheep grazing was initiated in the area. All trailing on the BDNF to and from the grazing allotments is controlled by terms specified in the grazing permits.

In addition to this historic trailing route on the west side of the Snowcrest Mountains, in recent years, the Lyon Wolverine band of sheep have been reaching the grazing allotments by trailing up the Standard Creek road on the east side of the Gravelly Mountains on their way from weed control grazing on private lands in the Madison Valley. This trailing takes approximately two days.

2009 Forest Plan Direction Specific to Domestic Sheep Allotments in the Gravelly Mountains
Monitoring shows that Forest Plan interim livestock grazing standards are being met. This includes upland maximum utilization level, winter range and riparian utilization standards. The primary grazing practice of "once over lightly grazing" results in a maximum forage use level of 35% and complies with the 35% forage use level for winter range prescribed by the 2009 Forest Plan. Moose winter range fluctuates much from year-to-year depending on snow conditions, however moose generally remain at high elevations in the Gravelly Mountains in the winter. All willow-dominated habitats function as potential moose winter range in these allotments.

Forest Plan Wildlife Standard 5 (page 49): Sheep allotments in the Gravelly Landscape which become vacant will be closed to sheep grazing or the vacant allotment may be used by an existing Gravelly Landscape sheep permittee, with no increase in permitted use (Scale – Gravelly Landscape).

Allotment administration field reviews over many years have shown improved vegetation and soils conditions on all sheep allotments. Annual Grazing Allotment Compliance Reports for the last 17 years have shown all sheep allotments meeting standards. No sheep allotment has been called out of compliance with the terms and conditions of the grazing permits or AMPs.

Preliminary Issues

We are currently collecting field data to determine the existing condition of soil, water and vegetative resources within the project area to help us assess whether proposed livestock grazing practices need to change to achieve desired objectives. In addition, ongoing litigation has raised concerns about risk of bighorn sheep exposure to pathogens from domestic sheep permitted in the project area and along trailing routes. Public comment is being sought to assist us in refining these issues and others for analysis. Potential effects disclosed in that analysis will assist the responsible official in determining:

1. Whether livestock grazing should be authorized on all, part, or none of the project area, and
2. If the decision is to authorize some level of livestock grazing, then what management prescriptions will be applied

How to Comment

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Strawberry To Cascade AMP

Legend

- Beaverhead-Deerlodge NF Administrative Boundary
 - US Forest Service
 - US Bureau of Land Management
 - Other Federal Lands
 - State Lands
 - Private
 - Towns
 - Major Roads
 - FS Sheep Allotments
 - FS Upper Ruby Cattle and Horse Allotment - Riparian and Basin Pastures Boundaries
 - Approximate Domestic Sheep Trailing Routes
- 0 1.5 3 4.5 6 Miles

Greenhorn Mountains

FS 290 Gravelly Range Road

FS 100 Ruby Road

Cottonwood Allotment

Black Butte Bench Allotment

Poison Basin Allotment

Coal Creek Allotment

Barnett Allotment

Fossil Hellroaring Allotment

Gravelly Range

FS 237 Standard Creek Road

Lyon Wolverine Allotment

Basin Pasture

Riparian Pasture

The "Notch"

Snowcrest Range

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Creation Date: 08/21/18

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